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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 2197
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0946
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0241
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0994
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0320
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0159
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI 0208
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA 0130
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 ASHGABAT 000779

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SUBJECT: UNDERSTANDING TURKMENISTAN: ASCENT INTO REALITY
-- THE POST-NIYAZOV ERA

ASHGABAT 00000779 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Richard E. Hoagland for reasons 1
.4 (B) and (D).

11. (U) This is a two-part series. The first part reviewed the Niyazov era and how he dragged his country into international disrepute. This second part suggests policy directions for Washington to consider, and reviews current constraints that will make Turkmenistan's recovery a long-term process.

U.S. POLICY

12. (SBU) During this significant historical period of transition away from Niyazovian excess, we need to be unusually patient. This is a traditionally conservative social culture, and a political culture that is molded by absolutist Central Asian khanism and Soviet history. To manage the transition away from Niyazov, the current inner circle of old-guard survivors will not move with revolutionary speed. They want to maintain their own power, influence, and perks as they make the transition. Berdimuhamedov and his inner circle are already beginning to weed out the worst of the incompetents. The ubiquitous posters of Niyazov are slowly beginning to come down. The "Ruhnama" foolishness will naturally recede: we don't need to press for it -- better to ignore it as an embarrassment of the past.

-- As we have been doing, we should couch our goals in terms of offers to cooperate for Turkmenistan's long-term benefit,

continuing to make clear we seek neither political dominance nor financial benefit. As we have seen elsewhere in Central Asia, this kind of U.S. diplomatic finesse tends to play well against Moscow's propensity for heavy-handedness.

-- Helping Turkmenistan become a responsible member of the family of nations will be a long-term process. While we should never trim our goals or compromise our core values, we should wisely manage our expectations for rapid change -- and we should think twice before we artificially limit contact because Turkmenistan has not yet met our expectations. Without steady, high-level engagement with us, Turkmenistan will be less likely to change in ways we want.

-- Our educational and professional exchange programs are our most powerful long-term tool. It is essential to significantly increase opportunities for people-to-people contact, because it is in our national interest to do so.

-- Likewise, we need to continue to increase efforts to ensure Turkmenistan opens to long-term and significant U.S. private-sector energy investment. Major U.S. corporations are our natural partners for political and economic reform. Employing hundreds of local citizens, they provide multiplier-effect education and training opportunities and, over time, instill international financial, commercial, and legal standards and democratic values.

-- Finally, in a culture that is based on personal relationships, we cannot over-emphasize the value of unusually frequent high-level contact. We need to court Turkmenistan, and should not be reluctant to do so.

TURKMENISTAN SURVIVED NIYAZOV, BUT(

ASHGABAT 00000779 002.2 OF 004

13. (C) Turkmenistan is not a cartoon country. Its people, at least in the past, were generally well educated, as were all Soviet citizens. They are decidedly not sheep. They are survivors. To weather the Niyazov era, they simply took their "normal life" underground, as happens in every dictatorial regime. And that included the high-level officials who chose Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov as Niyazov's successor. They likely chose him because he was a non-controversial member of the innermost circle, but also because they knew they could depend on him -- with their imprimatur -- to begin to repair Niyazov's worst degradations while not challenging their own power. Currently, he must consider their interests foremost because he does not have his own independent power base. This opaque-to-us inner circle of the old-guard elite probably should be seen as survivors who have made a collective decision to return Turkmenistan to a semblance of normalcy so that it can rejoin the family of nations -- on its own terms.

14. (C) We should not, with unfounded optimism, see Turkmenistan on a trajectory toward the West. At this historical moment and under this current government, Turkmenistan will not immediately become a "friend of the West." Rather, it will "deal with the West" more openly than it has in the last decade, as it is already dealing with the regional powers and its neighbors. In the best-case scenario, it will balance its interests, and take the view of the West into serious consideration. That in itself would be a welcome development. However, we need to understand the constraints.

POLITICAL CULTURE

15. (SBU) Despite the white-marble glitz of new Ashgabat, the edifice-complex monument to himself former President Niyazov imposed on his nation, Turkmenistan is a deeply traditional, clan-based, tribal society. The 20th-century legacy of the Soviet Empire, as well as the draconian controls Niyazov imposed as he sank into paranoia and xenophobia, remain

pervasive. At all levels, this government wants to "maintain control" to a degree that seems maniacal to us.

¶6. (C) Command economy and micro-managerial control from the top will not fade away quickly. Berdimuhamedov "instructs" his citizens on wheat planting and harvesting cotton. He just "instructed" the creation of a \$1B "free tourist zone" on the Caspian Sea shore, with more white-marble edifices. Where the tourists will come from, and whether they will get visas, are another matter. This is not only Soviet-style command economy, it's also the rule of a pre-Soviet khan.

¶7. (C) At the bilateral level, this perverse control is maddening to us because we cannot easily conduct the daily business of foreign policy. Everything -- whether a request to meet with President Berdimuhamedov or permission for a Peace Corps volunteer to work in a village school -- must be submitted via diplomatic note through the Foreign Ministry. The understaffed and inexperienced Foreign Ministry is buried in this avalanche of paper. What sometimes appears to us as snubs may have a large element of deadlock. The government will eventually have to simplify how it does its daily business.

ASHGABAT 00000779 003.2 OF 004

¶8. (C) Because of Niyazov's penchant for revolving-door personnel changes, many in the ministries are inexperienced. EU-TACIS Resident Adviser Michael Wilson believes about 4,000 highly educated Turkmen elite are abroad, having fled Niyazov, and may or may not ever return. That said, the people of Turkmenistan themselves are hospitable, relatively well-educated, and open to new ideas. The current trend seems to be that Berdimuhamedov is slowly and cautiously beginning to repair the damage Niyazov wreaked, but he is not likely soon to become an "enlightened reformer" in our terms. However, if we are unusually patient and not overly demanding, we might be able to nudge him and his government in the right direction.

RUSSIA

¶9. (U) As Turkmenistan is beginning to repair its relations with the West, so, too, it is repairing its relations with Russia. There's a natural affinity between the two countries because, as a former Soviet Socialist Republic, Turkmenistan shares with Russia a more or less common historical, political, economic, social, and even linguistic heritage.

¶10. (C) Moscow perceives itself as a world power now able to impose its long-held view that Central Asia is its sphere of influence. Moscow will seek every opportunity to limit Western, and especially U.S., political and commercial influence in Turkmenistan. The Kremlin and Gazprom -- increasingly one and the same -- need Turkmenistan for its natural gas, and will do everything possible to monopolize that resource. Russia understands -- and practices -- the culture of corruption, and will not hesitate to use that to its advantage in Turkmenistan. Moscow is not constrained by Western concerns about human rights and religious freedom. These issues are not on the table when Moscow's and Ashgabat's leaders sit down together. However, key leaders in Ashgabat, like Foreign Minister Meredov, are keenly aware of Turkmenistan's independence and sovereignty, and will not unnecessarily compromise those to please Russia.

MEREDOV

¶11. (C) Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Foreign Minister Rashit Meredov, though still young, is clearly one of the old-guard survivors of the Niyaz era. As part of the inner circle, he may, some believe, be one of the small handful of Berdimuhamedov's most powerful and trusted advisers. Some go so far as to see him as the Gray Cardinal, the quasi-Number Two. That, however, may be an exaggeration because we know so little about the real structures of

influence within Turkmenistan's culture and government.

¶12. (C) What's clear is Meredov is highly intelligent and certainly influential. He is the public face of Turkmenistan's policy to re-engage with the world. However, some observers caution he spent seven years in Moscow earning his law degree and is highly Russified. While this may give him a degree of natural sympathy for Moscow, it also would have exposed him daily to the indignities of Russia's ubiquitous racism. We suspect Meredov is, more than anything else, a Turkmenistani nationalist. Therefore, it's valuable for us and others in the West to continue to emphasize we firmly support Turkmenistan's independence, sovereignty, and the prosperity of its people.

ASHGABAT 00000779 004.2 OF 004

HOAGLAND